

milkround

MY FIRST

VIRTUAL

JOB

SUPPORTING GRADUATE  
TALENT REMOTELY

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# Introduction

Starting a new job virtually can be a daunting prospect, even for the most confident of candidates, but particularly for entry-level talent joining the world of work for the first time. For graduates, the idea of starting a job after university is both exciting yet overwhelming; a mix of emotions which have only been amplified by the pandemic during the last year.

The nature of team spirit that often stems from entering the workforce as a cohort of recent graduates just out of university has been stripped back. Typically, groups of entry-level talent will spend extended time together, with inductions and onboarding processes acting as a key time to make friends and find their feet.

At times, our current digital environment may prove difficult to navigate. This can make it harder to stand-out, connect with colleagues, understand training or generally feel engaged and motivated whilst communicating solely through a screen. It is a particular challenge for new starters who have no physical blueprint of how things work within a typical office environment. On the other hand, for many graduates, remote working and communication platforms may have made it much less intimidating to approach people in different seniority roles across a company.

## Our Research

For those who have started their working lives in a particularly isolated, individual and digital manner, entering physical workplaces once the opportunity arises will propose a new set of challenges completely. However, with remote working – in some form – likely here to stay longer-term, how has this impacted graduate confidence so far and how can companies learn from experiences over the last year when supporting entry-level talent moving forward?

At Milkround, we explore how recent graduates have felt starting their first job since the initial lockdown in March 2020. Specifically, we assess what has been done differently over the past year, if these virtual processes are here to stay and what else is needed to support graduate talent in the future. We also investigate the differences between graduates who have joined the workforce over the past year, and HR decision makers, when it comes to responding to and welcoming entry-level talent.

This offers a key opportunity for companies to listen closely to what graduates have experienced over the last year and what they want going forward. It is important HR teams review and adapt their processes accordingly so new starters can feel included both when within and away from the office. In turn, this will help attract better candidates from more diverse backgrounds, as a result of remote working, and enable teams to extend these learnings out to the wider workforce, when it comes to recruiting and onboarding future employees.



## Students and graduates said

- ✓ **62%** believe that the pandemic will negatively impact their career development prospects
- ✓ **53%** have struggled to make friends in the workplace since starting work remotely in March 2020
- ✓ **53%** have also not met any of their colleagues in person during this time
- ✓ **74%** of this year's cohort of remote graduate workers are in agreement that being able to join a team virtually will help graduates from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds access roles they might not have been previously able to due to the cost of moving to a new city or area
- ✓ **37%** of new workers were not sent technology to support them in their role such as a company laptop and **67%** of graduates were not sent any home office equipment (e.g. a desk, office chair, etc.) to use at home
- ✓ **54%** reveal that full-time remote working has negatively impacted their mental health

## HR decision makers said

- ✓ **55%** believe starting in a pandemic will negatively impact a new graduate's career development prospects
- ✓ **59%** who have hired remote working graduates in the last year have said these graduates have struggled to make friends with co-workers
- ✓ **75%** of companies who have hired graduates since March 2020, report that their new graduate starters have met other graduate starters in person, not over the phone or video call
- ✓ **74%** of HR decision makers agree joining teams virtually benefits graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds
- ✓ **54%** stated their company provided technology such as company laptop and **43%** provided office equipment such as a desk or chair
- ✓ **58%** report that they believe new graduate starters have enjoyed remote working

# The virtual workforce

## Graduate recruitment trends

Over the last twelve months, September 2020 and January 2021 proved to be the busiest months for graduates being hired, with the biggest lulls, understandably, in March and April 2020 following the announcement of the first UK lockdown. This research is supported by similar data from Milkround's website showing during September and January site visits were up by over **24%** and **40%** retrospectively month on month. Moreover, roles posted increased and applications rose significantly month on month also. Despite initial worries about apprenticeship and graduate schemes being put on hold, it is positive that over half (**57%**) of companies have hired graduates since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

However, as the world of work shifted to remote for most industries, this meant companies' recruitment and onboarding strategies had to follow, with over half (**52%**) having hired graduates either fully or partly remotely. Amongst companies who have hired graduates over the past year, the most effective recruitment process to attract candidates has been posting vacancies on job websites (**82%**). Other

effective processes include social media marketing (**79%**), advertising roles on their own company websites (**80%**) and on company social media pages (**75%**).

Over half (**54%**) of graduates were recruited via fully virtual interview processes, meaning they didn't meet any member of their future team in person prior to accepting the role. Whilst a third (**32%**) did experience an in-person interview, half of these (**16%**) also included a virtual interview. Interestingly, only **17%** of companies used virtual interviews as part of the recruitment process before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has now increased to over a third (**37%**) during the pandemic and is likely here to stay longer-term as restrictions and lockdown ease over the course of the year.



## Remote onboarding

Concerningly, a third (**32%**) of graduates who started work remotely since March 2020 did not receive formal onboarding training to the company – a process which is a crucial element in their early career journey.

The most popular communication process throughout 2020 from HR decision makers' perspective, has been to have regular contact between graduates and their line manager (**96%**), which is most likely to be virtual (**45%**). Graduates agree, with **70%** reporting having 'regular contact' with their line manager, whilst **40%** had a designated member of the team who was their remote working 'buddy'.

When it comes to equipment and monetary support, surprisingly over a third (**37%**) of new workers were not sent technology such as a company laptop to help them in their new role. Additionally, **67%** of graduates were not sent any home office equipment, such as a desk or office chair and only **18%** received money to help purchase these items. When asked what could have improved their onboarding process, these all ranked particularly high, as they are essential to remote working. However, when asking HR decision makers the same, over four-fifths (**89%**) of companies who have hired graduates over the past year stated they have provided remote working support to graduates including a company laptop (**54%**), and office equipment such as a desk or chair (**43%**).



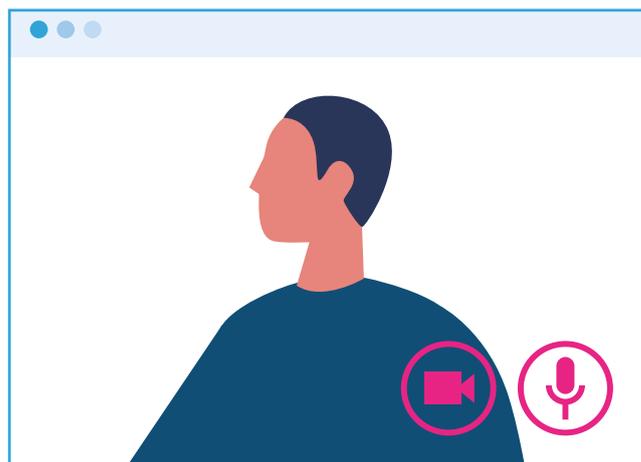
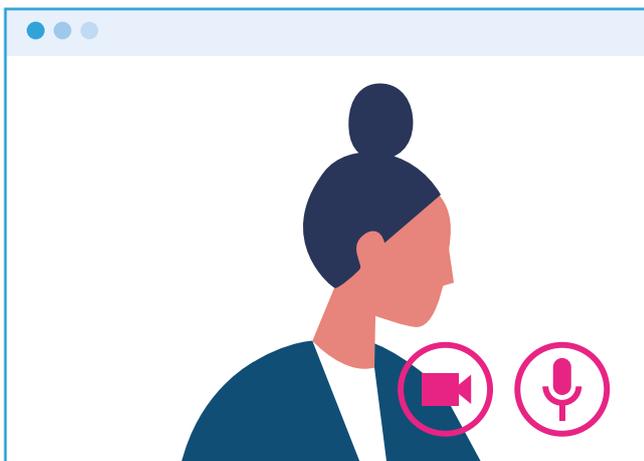
## Internal communication is more important than ever

Only **54%** of graduates who started work remotely during the pandemic were able to virtually meet their team members through organised introductory sessions, and just four in ten (**41%**) benefitted from a virtual welcome social event.

Unfortunately, this lack of personalisation within onboarding strategies meant over half of working graduates (**53%**) have struggled to make friends in the workplace whilst working from home, with the same number having also not met any of their colleagues in person since March 2020. What's more, a quarter (**22%**) don't think they will ever meet their colleagues in real life before they leave the company.

HR decision makers recognise this, with almost three-fifths (**59%**) noting that new graduates who have started working remotely have struggled to make friends with co-workers. There is clearly a need for new processes to be put in place to ensure new starters feel supported and are communicating with other peers regularly. Graduates revealed that

they'd like to speak to or hear from their colleagues more, particularly from those at the same level (**57%**), those they work with day-to-day (**53%**), their line manager (**45%**), and senior management or managing director's (**30%**). When asked what types of topics they'd like to hear more from their colleagues on, respondents prioritised skills-based training (**46%**), mentorship such as advice on how to solve a specific work issue (**41%**), updates on career progression opportunities (**41%**), and informal check-ins as to their own wellbeing (**32%**). The majority of recent graduates would like to receive more honest (**56%**), friendly (**43%**), and transparent (**34%**) communication from senior colleagues, signposting the value new workers place in proactive, regular and insightful communications from their employers whilst working remotely.



## Training for success

Three quarters (**77%**) of graduates who started work remotely over the past year also reported that introductory training sessions would have made their onboarding experience more enjoyable. Looking at the training graduates have received, over half have been given personal wellness techniques (**56%**), communication skills (**60%**) and productivity training (**51%**). However, these were also noted as the training topics they would like to have more sessions on. With **59%** of graduates saying they have struggled with motivation whilst working remotely, it is clear how beneficial these training sessions are for them and employers must ensure they offer this to all new graduate employees.

# Graduates are more mobile than ever

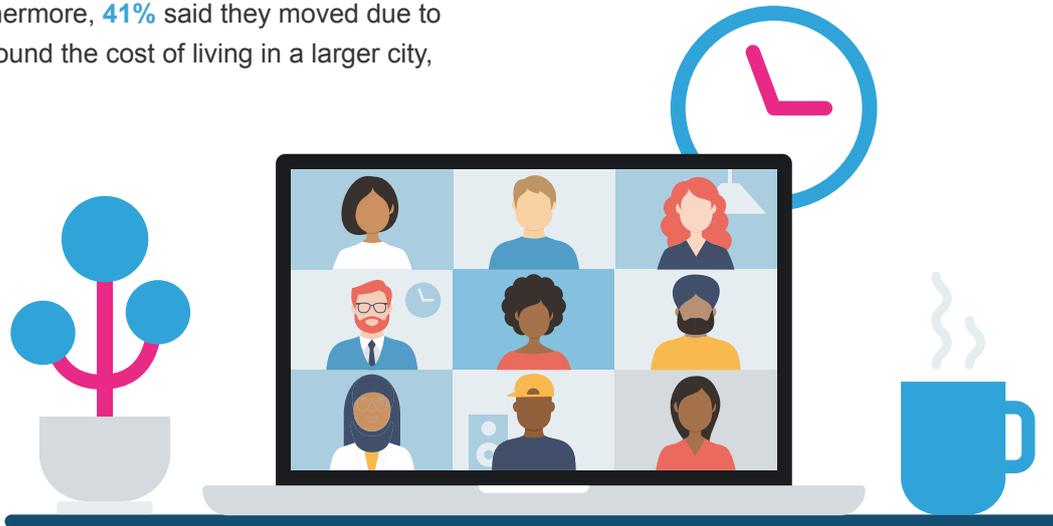
## Location, location, location

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused disruption to people's lives, and graduates are no exception. The extended periods of lockdown have led some students to re-evaluate plans around where they want to live and work post-university, with graduate talent being more mobile in general.

A third (34%) of those who started their first role remotely during 2020 have since moved to a different area to work, such as their family home. Of those that have been living in a different area to their office, respondents' biggest motivators include saving money (58%) and being closer to family and friends (44%). Furthermore, 41% said they moved due to concerns around the cost of living in a larger city,

which suggests that remote working offers broader opportunities for those who cannot afford to live in more expensive cities, such as London.

When it comes to moving back to their office location, nearly four in ten (38%) who are currently living elsewhere report that they do not plan to move back to their initial location. A similar number (43%) do plan on moving back, however this is dependent on lockdown restrictions being eased. A quarter (25%) report they will move back as restrictions start to ease, whilst 14% will move once restrictions have fully eased.



## Flexibility is key post-Covid-19

Looking ahead to the future, for those graduates who have spent time working in 2020, nearly half (48%) would like to have the option to work remotely and in the office as they choose. Flexibility is key here, with only 13% wanting to work remotely full-time in comparison to 17% wanting to work in the office full-time. If entry-level talent are able to work flexibly, over a fifth (22%) flagged they would like to spend the majority of their time working remotely, spending one to two days in the office.

As a result, many organisations have responded to graduates' increased desire for mobility. Almost four-fifths (78%) of HR decision makers have advertised graduate roles as working from a remote location over the last year. Amongst those, over seven in ten (71%) have noticed candidates applying from a range of locations beyond their immediate area.



# How the pandemic is impacting plans and confidence

## Disruptions have caused decrease in career confidence

Over half (**53%**) of students and recent graduates believe that the pandemic will negatively impact their future careers, whilst **62%** feel it will impact their development prospects. Interestingly, this pessimism is shared by HR decision makers, as over half (**55%**) believe starting in a pandemic will negatively impact a new graduate's career development prospects.

As a result, graduates report decreased confidence in the current jobs market. Over one in ten (**11%**) plan to stay in education for longer than previously planned,

with **64%** planning on studying a master's degree. In addition, **14%** of students and recent graduates have had to change their plans to go travelling or take a gap year due to travel restrictions, which has led to greater demand for graduate jobs in an increasingly competitive recruitment landscape.





## Temporary career pivots may have sparked new-found job opportunities, but long-term remote working is taking its toll

Many of those forced to change their career plans have taken up employment in another industry, with nearly half (**45%**) of graduates reporting that they are not currently working in the industry they hoped to work in. Similarly, **38%** of students and recent graduates said that the pandemic has made them consider working in a different industry to the one they had previously aspired to work in.

Reflecting on their future prospects, both students and graduates worry that there won't be jobs in the industry they were looking to work in (**38%**), and that the industry they wanted to work in has been heavily impacted by the pandemic (**35%**). However, for some, the pandemic has altered their priorities and perspective when it comes to a career, with **9%** stating that the pandemic has made them want to work in an industry that employs key workers.

The permanent working from home set up has also proved difficult for some new starters, with **54%** of respondents revealing that full-time remote working has negatively impacted their mental health (**54%**) and they have struggled to remain motivated (**61%**). Similarly, just over half (**57%**) of HR decision makers report that new graduate starters have struggled to remain motivated whilst working from home, while an almost identical proportion (**58%**) believe that new graduates have enjoyed remote working. This suggests that companies and graduates need to consider their remote-working set ups on a case-by-case basis to ensure that everyone feels supported and able to contribute effectively.

# Graduates' first-hand experiences

## India-Jayne, Website Producer, 2019 Graduate



My first day was the very end of February 2020, and three weeks later we were sent home “as a test”, but we never returned! I have now been working in this role for one year, and being remote has been strange but I really enjoy it. Our normal stand-up meetings and fortnightly lectures with the directors have been replaced by Zooms, and we have regular check-ins with our managers. However, I do feel as though I have missed out on some of the great in-office benefits of working for such a company, and also in getting to know my colleagues socially.



## Kade, Sales Executive, 2019 Graduate



My experience working remotely has not been the most ideal, there's a lack of empathy and there's something strange about never seeing the faces of your managers. There's very little training or communication - it's very much sink or swim and I believe that because it's remote - the lack of care extends from this.



## Olivia, Account Manager, 2019 Graduate



I feel like I've been able to settle in at a good pace. Not being able to move yet has allowed me to just focus on the new job instead of stressing about other things! I do miss being in an office though and would ideally like a mix of both remote and in-office work. Not being around a team like you would be in an office means you can't have those little conversations where you'd be fostering friendships, so I think the process is definitely slowed down.



# Looking ahead

## Graduates and HR decision makers are in agreement on what best practice looks like for the future

Graduates and those who make graduate recruitment decisions have had to adapt how they engage with each other over the last year – and there is agreement that some of the changes made should be here to stay. Over half (54%) of respondents reported that they felt more confident before their virtual interview than prior to an in-person interview. This is positive news with 64% of HR decision makers agreeing that their company should continue interviewing graduates virtually once Covid-19 restrictions ease.

Looking ahead, as restrictions allow, the majority (63%) of graduate respondents would like to have an initial virtual interview, before attending an in-person interview. Nearly half of graduates (49%) flagged concerns that they were not able to fully or accurately convey themselves during a virtual interview. Therefore, a combined approach to

interview processes could help employers ensure they're getting to know graduates as effectively and authentically as possible.

Importantly, 71% of HR decision makers think that the pandemic has made their company reconsider how they can make their recruitment more inclusive. Three quarters (74%) of recent graduates believe that being able to join a team virtually will help graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds access roles they might not have been previously able to due to the cost of moving to a new city or area. The same number (74%) of HR decision makers agree, boding well for social mobility and inclusion in the future.





# What can employers do moving forwards?

**Chris May, Graduate Jobs Expert at Milkround, shares their top tips on how employers can best approach graduate recruitment and retention in the future:**

- 1 Onboarding and training are key:** Make the best use of graduate workers' time and ensure that onboarding helps set them up for success. Incorporate training on personal wellness and productivity throughout their development, as graduates are keen to learn.
- 2 Remote bricks and mortar:** Remember that some graduates may not have a formal desk space, or they might be working in the same room as younger siblings doing schoolwork. Reach out to graduates and ask if there is any equipment from the office that can be sent to them to help ensure they have everything they need to complete their work.
- 3 Virtual support systems:** Set time aside for young workers to meet fellow colleagues, potentially through virtual social events or a peer buddy system. Do not let these systems just form part of a graduate's onboarding, instead, ensure they are an ongoing part of their progression strategies.
- 4 Being honest and forthcoming about career prospects:** Be as honest and forthcoming as you can with young talent about what the impact of the pandemic and remote working will have on their career development prospects. Provide clear timelines and goals which reflect the current situation, to ensure transparency.
- 5 Creating reasons to be optimistic:** Continue to offer development opportunities (e.g. online courses, or training facilitated by in-house experts) to encourage workers to be optimistic. This is each employer's responsibility and there is a clear business case for ensuring young workers continue developing sought-after skills.
- 6 Improving social mobility requires action:** Hold yourself accountable when it comes to accessibility. Take decisive action to ensure that new-starters (remote or not), who may be traditionally under-represented in the workforce, have equitable experiences to their colleagues.

# Summary

The benefits and challenges posed by remote working have been hot topics amongst HR and recruitment professionals for years. However, the Covid-19 pandemic very suddenly forced those conversations to become concrete company policy, the success of which was reliant on employees being able to adapt to new ways of working. The general consensus for graduates and HR decision makers alike is that remote working – be it full time or a flexible balance between time working from home and in the office – is likely here to stay in some form.

This poses exciting opportunities for employers and employees alike, particularly in allowing companies to recruit from larger and more diverse talent pools across the UK. However, as we have seen, there are ways employers can improve their employees' remote experience by having impactful conversations about how best to approach recruitment, onboarding, and retention.

These conversations must pay specific attention to graduate talent who are remotely entering the workforce for the first time. The young people who entered the labour market during the UK's national lockdowns, have started their first formal jobs remotely, and have never met their teams outside of the confines of a Zoom or Teams call. The learnings we have been able to collate from their experiences provide a template for employers trying to ensure graduate workers feel engaged and are able to be productive, but also for those recruiting graduate talent for remote positions in the future.

Milkround surveyed 500 HR/Recruitment decision makers via Opinium between 8th and 12th February, and 3,243 students and recent graduates via Milkround between 28th January and 8th February.

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